AL SALON illustrated



To the dreamers, here & there



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FOREWORD

2020–21 marks ten years since the emergence of a wave of revolutions in West Asia and North Africa. Even before that, there were movements and protests for participation and social justice.

The Rosa-Luxemburg-Stiftung is grateful to engage with partners like NAWARA who experiment with creative forms of knowledge production addressing such revolutionary processes. Looking at these revolutionary processes we want to focus on the experience of activists, researchers, and artists, especially their perspectives on the struggles of the last decade and beyond.

Rather than framing this decade in terms of "success" or "failure," or talk about "Arab spring" or "Arab winter," we approach this decade as "a time of movement."

The intense and moving debates portrayed in this illustrated documentation show the extent to which the personal is political, and how some issues are commonly left out of political debates, even though they are shared by many. For example: How can we engage in a revolutionary context without giving up on our personal wellbeing? And what forms of care and healing are necessary in times of revolutionary upheaval?

Each of the following sections addresses specific topics discussed in the five virtual "Al Salon" sessions organized by NAWARA from November 2020 to February 2021. As many of the Salon participants live in exile (due largely to the increasing repression in their home countries), questions around the role of activists in the diaspora were another important focus: What role can activists in exile play? How can they support the struggles in the region? And how can they deal with feelings of powerlessness? What forms of solidarity are possible, and what kind of imaginaries are necessary to build effective structures of solidarity?

Time and again, Al Salon discussions addressed the role of German and European policies, particularly how they negatively impact the emancipatory movements in the region. European governments tend to pursue their own political and economic interests, turning their back on democratic aspirations. Therefore, the question here is also: What role can civil society in the Global North play in order to show solidarity with activists and movements in the Global South?

The revolutions, protest movements, and related uprisings did not begin in 2011 and they certainly will not end in 2021. Through the personal stories of the Salon participants we learn about their experiences, their dreams and their struggles for a better life.

I want to invite you on these very special journeys. And I want to thank NAWARA and all the participants of the Salons for sharing these powerful stories with us.

Tanja Tabbara

Head of Africa Unit, Rosa-Luxemburg-Stiftung September 2021

Revolution without despair or hope. Graffiti by Ammar Abo Bakr of murdered poet and activist Shaima al-Sabbagh (1984–2015). Prenzlauer Berg Berlin.

PROLOGUE

Ten years have passed since the first wave of contemporary revolutions in North Africa and West Asia (NAWA) – a wave of uprisings and revolt that raised the bar for the dreams of millions. People dreamed of and pursued freedom and social justice, the downfall of authoritarian regimes and the establishment of new social and political structures in their stead. But over the past ten years, the lives of millions in the region have drastically changed, as they have faced multi-layered and violent realities. For many, this decade has brought the loss of homes and loved ones, mental and physical pain, financial and social crises and an increased pressure to migrate and/or escape. And with the ebbs and flows of this passing time, the lofty dreams raised high in the heady days of revolution also began to wane.

Today, a discourse of stagnation and defeat has come to prevail in academic interventions reflecting on the 2011 uprisings, rather than focusing on how the lives of the people in the region have continued to unfold over time. In the last ten years, the region has witnessed unprecedented forms and degrees of collective movement: social, political and physical. As a result, many of us in and from the region have experienced an acceleration of time and an ambiguous relationship to space. This has left many of us feeling disoriented, as if our memories lack chronology, and with a collective need to make sense of these life-altering changes.

In response to these developments, we established Al Salon as an attempt to stop the acceleration of time and its false sense of linear progression. We jumped at the opportunity presented by the tenth anniversary of the 2011 moment to claim a space for collective reflection; to carve out a few hours in which to think together about what happened when we took to the streets en masse and what has come to pass since. We sought to create space for an exercise in collective sense-making that seemed to be a privilege many of us had not yet been able to afford.

Al Salon came at a time when the whole world seemed to pause on the precipice of a global pandemic. Instead of postponing our plans, we seized the moment. The organizers of Al Salon, many of the speakers and most of our participants—like the rest of the world—were confined indoors. Unable to meet in person, we adapted our original plan and shifted to holding the Salon sessions online.



Some of the questions we raised were:

How has the sense of post-revolutionary defeat been experienced on personal and political levels? What are the links between the first and second waves of revolutions in the NAWA region?

What are the political challenges and opportunities that have arisen for urban inhabitants—particularly the urban poor—during and since these revolutions?

How can healing and restoration be an essential part of revolutionary struggle?

And what is the role of different diasporic communities in supporting the ongoing struggles in the region?

Holding Al Salon online came with its fair share of challenges. We questioned the possibility of creating a truly participatory space to share and discuss our reflections online. Before the start of Al Salon, we held an online meeting from Berlin via Zoom with fifty participants from all over the globe. We got to know one another and created a code of ethics to guide us during Al Salon's five sessions: a manifesto for our Salon. Together we established that:



Al Salon is an inclusive, transnational space to reflect on revolution and social change, where participants critically engage with related issues that touch their lives, activism, studies and interests.

Al Salon follows an interdisciplinary approach that is flexible in content and open to discussion.

We respect each other's differences, uphold diversity and commit to fostering a safer space by practicing ethics of care.

Al Salon ran from November 2020 through February 2021. Throughout the five sessions, many participants shared stories, thoughts and reflections with one another and challenged each other in caring and constructive ways.

After Al Salon ended, the months that followed saw a surge in political resistance movements across the region and other parts of the world. This gestures towards the fact that we never stop witnessing monumental history in the making, whether from the vantage point of direct participation on the streets or huddled around screens, seas and oceans away.

Below is a snapshot of the conversations, thoughts and emotions we shared in our attempt to make sense of these moments throughout the four months of Al Salon.



How can we produce local knowledge with those people who were at the forefront of the revolutions but who are often structurally silenced and excluded?

Should we hold on to our anger as fuel?

Narrating **DEFEAT**

AL SALON illustrated

Our first session revolved around the theme of defeat. The session was held on 19 November 2020, marking the ninth anniversary of the clashes on Mohamed Mahmoud Street, just off Tahrir Square in Cairo. Joined by Syrian writer Yassin al-Haj Saleh and Egyptian historian Khaled Fahmy, we attempted to reflect on and commemorate this moment by engaging with questions on the narrative of defeat that now surrounds these clashes.

Without falling victim to romanticization or dismissal, we posed questions around the concept of defeat to understand the last ten years of movements. Why does the memory of other moments of defeat in the region's history, such as that of June 1967, continue to linger or "haunt" us? How can we analyze the present moment without trapping ourselves within a binary of defeat versus victory?

Saleh argued that hazima (defeat) is tied to a specific historical event with a particular start and a definitive end. If those who witness it fail to re-define their identities and their positions in a post-defeat world, Saleh claimed this can transform into khassara (loss), which is even more serious than defeat. He warned against potentially transforming hazima into khassara because the latter has long-term paralyzing cultural and psychological effects. In order to circumvent this, he suggested we must fight to write our own critical narratives of history and of the present moment, beyond narratives of victimization and lament.

"I think what we're trying to do today—particularly in [the] diaspora—is to fight for a narrative." - Yassin al-Haj Saleh I think what we're trying to do today—particularly in [the] diaspora—is to fight for a narrative.

Yassin al-Haj Saleh

The way forward is not to make the comparison between the different moments of defeat. Rather, we must tell our stories. From the position we're in now, how can we tell our narrative? Firstly. seeing ourselves in 1967, 1976, 1977 until 2011 and 2013, as moments, we reveal ourselves as actors entering the political stage. And to recognize our defeat, but also to recognize our existence in our narrative.

Khaled Fahmy

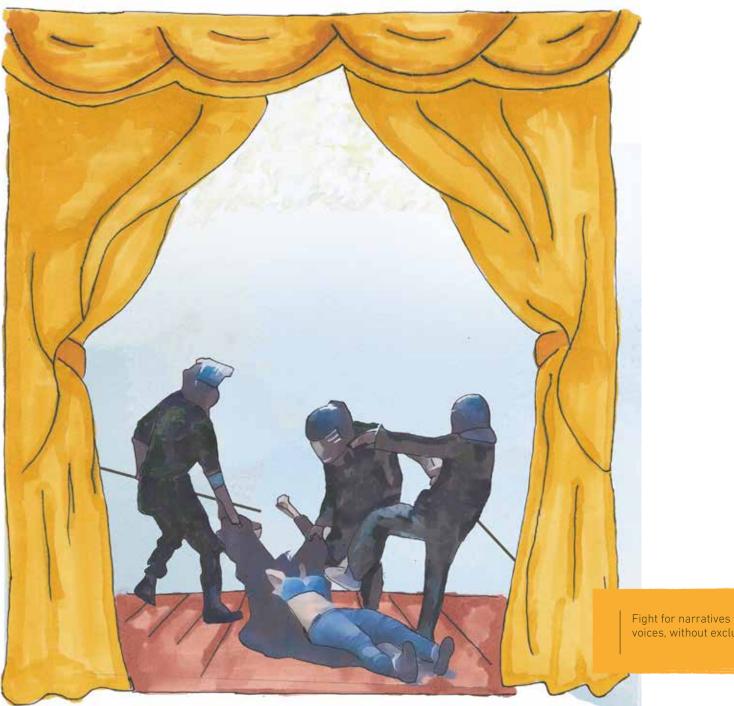


Khaled Fahmy began his talk by returning to the ways in which we write history. In an attempt to understand the present moment, he emphasized the importance of historicizing. He shared books, photos and articles that covered the 1967 defeat to point out stories that unmasked layers of this historical defeat that often remain hidden or are intentionally silenced. In relation to these stories, Fahmy drew parallels to dominant narratives around defeat and those of the moment we are currently witnessing. He insisted on writing history not as a series of events of what happened, but intentionally as stories, where various voices from different positions of power are present and consciously centered.

"The way forward is not to make the comparison between the different moments of defeat. Rather, we must tell our stories. From the position we're in now, how can we tell our narrative? Firstly, seeing ourselves in 1967, 1976, 1977 until 2011 and 2013, as moments, we reveal ourselves as actors entering the political stage. And to recognize our defeat, but also to recognize our existence in our narrative."

- Khaled Fahmy

We moved together from questions on defeat to those around defining narratives about what transpired over the last ten years. There was a sense of urgency in turning to the ways in which we, as ordinary people, can tell our stories and use our own voices, without eliminating those of others.



Fight for narratives that include our voices, without excluding others'.

The Second Wave of **REVOLUTIONS:**

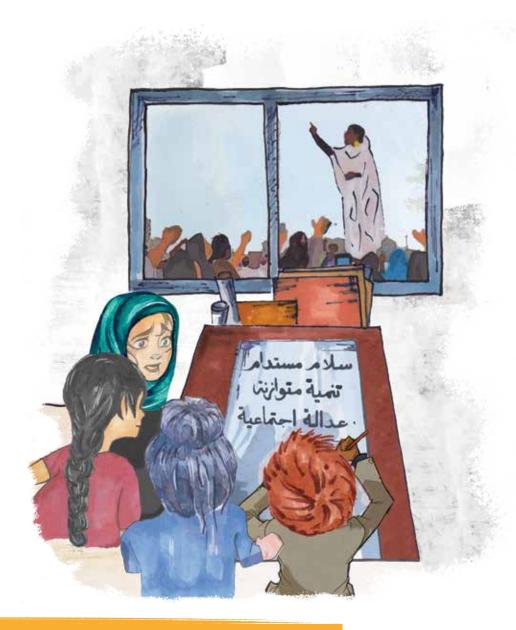
Moving Beyond Binaries

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From the end of 2019 onwards, a second wave of protests erupted in several countries across the NAWA region, particularly in Sudan, Algeria and Lebanon. This second wave of revolutions urged us to reflect on how revolutions and counter-revolutions could potentially influence each other. Two scholar-activists from Sudan and Algeria, Sara Abbas and Naoual Belakhdar, discussed this question in our second Salon on 3 December 2020.

For the second wave of NAWA revolutions, the COVID-19 pandemic played an influential role in relation to the forms, means and trajectories of political movements, both locally and globally. Despite the fact that the two waves happened ten years apart and in different contexts, common experiences and knowledge also point to connections between them. Therefore, we reflected together on the continuities and discontinuities in the stories from the first and second waves of political movements in the region.

Abbas discussed how the demands and forms of action in the Sudanese revolution, as well as its political trajectory, reflected many lessons learned from the first wave of revolutions. However, she also identified the tendency to analyse the region's movements through binaries as an unfortunate intellectual continuity that seems to have travelled from the first wave of revolutions to the second, often reinforced in academia. One such binary cited by Abbas was that of victory and defeat. Recalling another, she mentioned that in Sudan, the predominant discussion in late-2020 became centered around reiterating that there was a time for state-building and a time for revolution. She also pointed to the binary of leaderless versus strongly-led movements that was prevalent in narratives on the first wave of uprisings as a common discussion point during Sudan's uprising. In her view, the main problem with such superimposed binaries is that they limit spaces of action and corner actors into rigid choices.



Demands of the Sudanese Revolution: Sustainable Peace, Social Justice, Balanced Development Alongside Abbas, Belakhdar highlighted the transnational connections and learning processes in and between movements in the NAWA region and the diaspora. To see these threads of similarity and ongoing interconnectedness between movements and geographies, she suggested, does not mean we must collapse our complex realities and experiences into simple binaries portrayed by and preferred in the mainstream narrations of NAWA movements over the last 10 years.

Thus, we discussed how our own narratives, those emanating from within and about the revolutions, must make space for multiplicity. They should encompass the plethora of experiences, ethnicities and languages that make up the region. Conversations about shared experiences across time and space should take note of the hindrances of nationalism. In an attempt to decolonize and process-orient our movements, we concluded, we must examine transnational links, while also staying true to specific contexts and histories.



Did the revolutions succeed or fail? Our narratives on revolutions are multiple, multi-layered and reflexive. They involve different actors and extend beyond simple binaries.

Present ABSENTEES

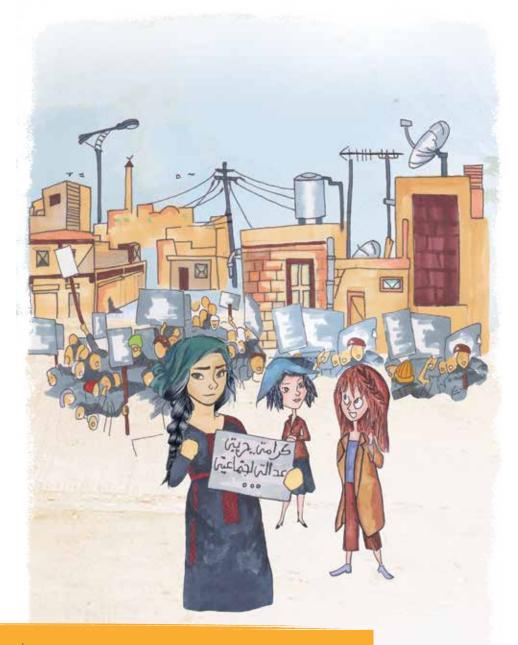
and Untold **STORIES**

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Tarek el-Tayeb Mohamed Bouazizi was a Tunisian street vendor who immolated himself on 17 December 2010, sparking the Tunisian Revolution. On the same day, ten years later, we gathered to commemorate his memory. In particular, we aimed to think together about how the urban poor are included in or excluded from politics, and how this influences the narratives of revolutions from a decade prior. Joining us to discuss these themes were Tunisian historian Leyla Dakhli and Egyptian urban scholar Omnia Khalil.

In an attempt to understand the lead-up to and the events of the revolutions, we must understand processes of knowledge production. Dakhli argued that this knowledge must be locally produced. From this starting point, she went on to discuss some of the major challenges to producing local knowledge, especially in restrictive research environments and with a lack of resources.

On this note of difficult research environments, Khalil shared with us details of a participatory research project she was part of in a popular neighborhood in Cairo. Through the lens of her research, Khalil discussed the living conditions of the urban poor in Cairo, and elaborated on threats of forced eviction as a result of expedited urban reconstruction in the city within the last ten years.



Urban poor, women, queers, minorities and other marginalized people and communities in the region are present-absentees: they were and are on the frontlines of the region's movements, but rarely appear in narratives on the revolutions, or are often misrepresented when they do. This third Salon forced us to think about those people who are often on the frontlines of the revolutions, but simultaneously absent from the hegemonic political and academic narratives about these events. Throughout the discussion, we also tackled questions of gender and how new urban strategies in the region fail to take into consideration women and their security. In framing narratives on the revolutions, we must examine who we render (in)visible, whose perspectives we prioritize or exclude, and why.

Looking at the (in)visibility of the urban poor helps us understand what exclusion says about a narrative—regardless of the narrator. Does their forced invisibility intend to hide the violent nature of some of these protests? Or does it help in getting support from certain societal groups by polishing the image of revolutions as ostensibly centered around the middle class? Is it simply about power relations and, consequently, a lack of access to the tools of knowledge production? Or is it because those most often rendered invisible are consistently and structurally impeded from writing themselves into their own stories?

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Erasing the Anonymous.

HEALING in times of REVOLUTION

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AL SALON illustrated Healing I



"[Healing] feels like cooking. My 'recipe' consists of reducing city stressors, pollution, and junk food. It involves adding things like getting better at navigating personal boundaries, accepting life's gifts, and believing I deserve a good life despite the ugliness surrounding me."

Yara Sallam "On Illness. When bodies can fight no more," Connecting Resistances blog On this last question, Awadalla pointed to forgiveness as an act of condemnation in itself. He explained that when we don't forgive and make our anger our fuel to act, we hold onto our pain. We embrace it as a part of our identities, which makes us destined to remain victims. The discussion tackled how activists sometimes get trapped in "oppression Olympics" or "resilience Olympics." The former is when certain narratives of pain are used to silence others, which can generate a sense of guilt. The latter is when a competition of resilience and endless productivity arises, no matter the state of our bodies and minds. However, pain is pain; there is no competition on this matter. We discussed whether and how we might turn to accountability to disrupt this stubborn notion of resilience instead.

Over these ten years, and even before, our bodies and mental health were drastically pulled into our struggles. Whether we intentionally acknowledge or ignore these facts, they become part of our experience with political movements. It is thus critical to include these physical and mental realities—pain and suffering, as well as joy and a sense of community—in narrating what happened and how we lived and experienced these revolutions.

Our fourth Salon session was held to commemorate perhaps the most significant day of the Egyptian Revolution, the Friday of Anger. Ten years after the fact, we met on 28 January 2021 with writer-activist Ahmed Awadalla and feminist-legal researcher Yara Sallam, to discuss mental health and the possibilities of healing during times of revolutions.

Together we discussed the emotions around political defeat and how empathy without boundaries can become self-destructive. How do we understand our mental health and the implications political movements can have on it? In the diaspora and at home, many of us lack the resources and societal support to address these emotions.

Awadalla problematized conventional mental health institutions, both in the region and in exile. Drawing on experiences with therapy and his work as a psychosocial worker, he called for decolonizing mental health interventions. Sallam, in turn, posed important questions around the relationship between our bodies and our emotions. "What do we do with our bodies that are sick and tired?" she asked. She suggested that healing should be both a personal and a collective act. It cannot be achieved alone, she warned, nor if one lacks the will to do so.

Participants raised other questions on the privilege-based aspects of mental health, where and when we can seek help without being questioned, and what rituals and mechanisms can help in healing. Should we hold on to our anger as fuel or should we forgive as one way to heal and remove ourselves from the emotions of political defeat? In the latter case, how can we keep fighting injustice in our personal and public lives without our anger?



Looking Onwards from the **DIASPORA**

Our fifth and last Salon was held on 11 February 2021 around the role of diasporic communities in narrative writing and maintaining memory. During Al Salon, a participant captured the tensions of diasporic activism: "In the diaspora, in Berlin, we try to link struggles and to learn from each other. But I realized that the diaspora is a bubble where this works. It is only in this bubble that we can talk about certain topics without the fear of persecution and discrimination."

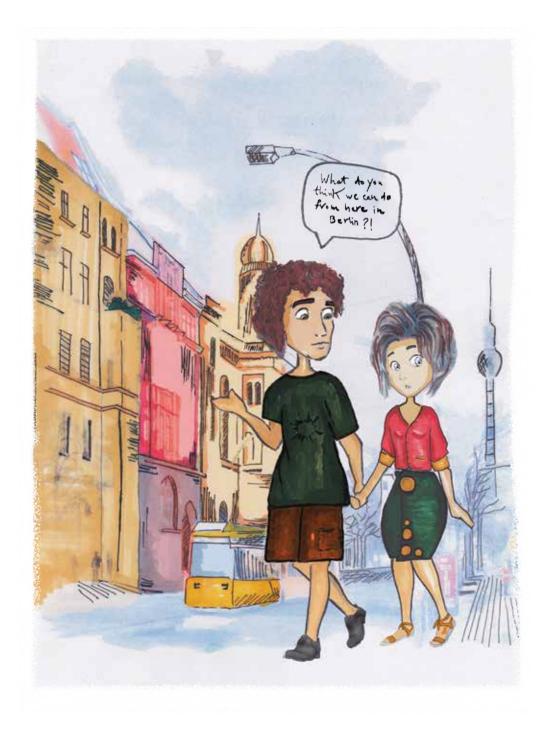
For her, this came with the realization that the diaspora's interconnectedness with and distance from our previous contexts is somewhat contradictory. Berlin-based Syrian activist Wafa Mustafa and Sudanese artist-activist Ahmed Isamaldin shared with us their similar concerns.

Through stories of her own activism, Mustafa emphasized how diasporic communities are largely scattered and divided. She elaborated on the struggles of activism from the diaspora: difficulties in accessing resources and their availability in the diaspora country and the constrictions of politics back home. She also cited the toll activism can have on the mental health of activists, especially when far away from the regions with which their activism is connected.

Along the same line of thought, Isamaldin called for a need to create connections between different communities in the diaspora. He suggested that fostering these connections between groups and their struggles not only aids in knowledge production, but also creates a larger base for solidarity. This solidarity should intentionally be extended to those in the margins of the countries in which they live. As Mustafa claimed earlier in the session, "My pain is not exclusive to me."

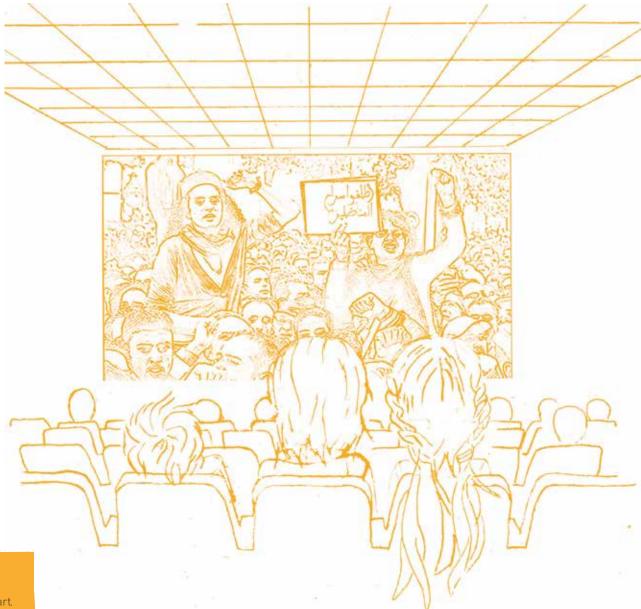
This Salon discussion was particular to Berlin, a city of opportunity for diasporic activism. However, this was not without recognition of the German capital's tendency to become a bubble, removed from reality. We also discussed how a focus on Berlin as a space of opportunity for diasporic activism can also shroud the struggles and injustices diasporic communities face in their everyday lives. In the diaspora, in Berlin, we try to link struggles and to learn from each other. But I realized that the diaspora is a bubble where this works. It is only in this bubble that we can talk about certain topics without the fear of persecution and discrimination.

One of Al Salon participants

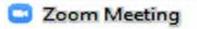


In understanding the role of the diaspora in activism, we concluded that all the forms of actions of these communities are crucial to maintain our memories and bolster the realities of our struggles against the grain of structural and intentional efforts to erase them. These actions can vary: from organizing protests to writing statements, establishing spaces to discuss and support each other, and creating and sharing art, such as curating film festivals, recording podcasts, writing articles and novels, performing stories, songs and dance, or any other creative forms.

Ultimately, these efforts aid in narrating our own stories, using our own words and our own voices. For many of us, we have realized that participating in activism from the diaspora has become a sort of survival mechanism. It is not despite the differences and the similarities between our experiences, but rather because of them, that we form solidarity with one another and continue onwards. We are working to process the losses we have incurred and to connect individual pain with collective pain and endurance.

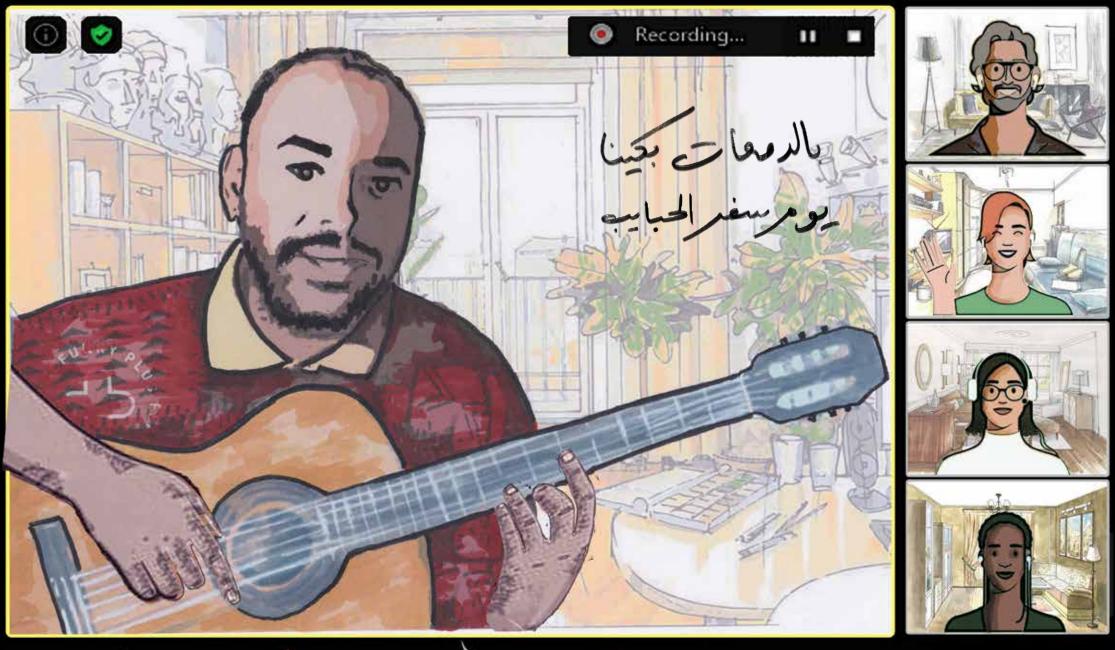


The actions of diaspora communities are crucial, especially artistic activities: curating film festivals, recording podcasts, performing stories, music and dance, or any other creative art. They aid in narrating our own stories, using our own words and our own voices.





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